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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses how counselors' preoccupation with the present impedes their helping clients cope with life's impending changes. While people normally accept predictable and conformable deviations, second order changes (fluctuations which are unpredictable and life altering) typically require intensive adaptation. College students in particular undergo significant cognitive, attitudinal, and psychosocial development. Research shows that the organizational and interpersonal climate of college departments, particularly the attitudes of faculty members, may considerably affect students' cognitive and non-cognitive development. Students who hold beliefs wholly incongruous with departmental views become rigid and do not seem to benefit as much from their education as those students whose outlooks differ only slightly from their department's convictions. Too much discontinuity between student and institution may create resistance and too little may produce insufficient challenge. College counseling centers report that students now raise more difficult and serious personal problems than ever before: an unsurprising outcome of an increasingly complex social system. Counselors must educate themselves about their institution's learning environment so that they may help students achieve reasonable self-acceptance and a workable relationship with college reality. To fulfill their roles, counselors must be among the most fully and broadly educated people in the world. (RJM)

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Vision in College Counseling

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Vision in College Counseling

Counselors, it seems, have never been very good at creating visions or forecasting the future. There is little in the counseling literature of a visionary nature. Much of counseling theory has been borrowed, and, as a profession, counselors have done only a little better conducting applied research. Counselors seem much more comfortable focusing on the present, the groups and individuals with whom they work or the programs they direct, and as a result, perhaps, counselors are much better practitioners than theorists.

In this respect counselors are more like engineers than physicists. Engineering projects are accomplished more easily by increasing the resources and labor available, or by increasing funding to develop training and technology. Science, on the other hand, is not so linear. Its greatest findings have almost always occurred serendipitously (e.g., gravity, relativity, x-ray). Work on one problem often yields insight into other problems and may even lead into entirely different directions as a result. A recent example of cross-fertilization and the serendipitous nature of basic scientific research is the work being done with AIDS/HIV and the common cold. Although quite different in their causes and symptoms, basic research in cellular and molecular biology indicates that underlying parallels exist (e.g., the use of surprisingly similar "decoy molecules" as a potential step toward preventing or curing both

diseases). It is conceivable that an eventual cure for one might result from work on the other. The study of life at deeper and deeper levels will almost certainly have implications for many fields including our own, but predicting the answers to be found or their implications for the future is not likely.

My own work, developing and applying the theory of self-organization development to counseling and student affairs, leads me to understand that the major or second order changes that occur in the world cannot be predicted because in any open system it is not possible to maintain or even know the initial conditions that exist for any situation (Caple, 1985, 1987a, 1987b). Read about Lorenz's discoveries in predicting the weather (Gleick, 1988). Small fluctuations in any system can lead to very large changes in that system. These changes are created out of the randomness inherent in self-organizing systems when experiencing fluctuations that create turbulence. Change will occur when a threshold is reached and directs the system into a path created from among many potentialities that no one can predetermine. A new level of organization will result that will become more integrated and complex than the preceding one, but it will require more energy to maintain it. The system will be more creative, however, and more susceptible to further change. When the political conditions in Western Europe and the Soviet Union were changing, how often, for example, did we hear from columnists and political analysts the statement "Who could

have predicted these events." The answer is, of course, no one (see Gaddis, 1992).

Between changes of a second order magnitude, systems function to maintain structural stability. Changes occur that modify the interaction of the system's components but are not sufficient to alter the system's structure and cause a second order reordering of the system. Every day human beings make changes in their routine or behavior that do not alter the basic integrity of the self-system or change the person's perception of the world. These are changes or fluctuations that are reasonably predictable, but first order changes act to dampen or prevent second order change by maintaining the existing structure. People are normally accepting and comfortable with first order changes because they are predictable and do not require changing the person's perception of the world, but people are apprehensive and fearful about second order changes because they are unpredictable, unknown, and therefore, seem risky or threatening. The task, therefore, is not so much to predict but to increase the human capacity to respond to both first and second order changes that occur in an increasingly complex world. The problems that clients bring to us by their very nature direct our attention to the present, but new vision is needed to become aware of and understand the interacting nature of first and second order changes that create tomorrow's world.

There is much happening in the present that requires better responses. New diversities in communities and on college campuses are creating new stressors in people's lives as they struggle to cope with these changes. How will counselors influence clients to better respond to the changes going on within and around the client and consequently experience life differently? What impact, if any, does counseling and related activities have upon college student outcomes? How does counseling contribute to the mission of the institution? Do students who receive counseling stay in college longer? Do they finish more frequently as a result of receiving counseling? Does counseling really prepare students to make better choices in their lives? What is the affect of counseling on student learning, now and later? Do students or other recipients of counseling become better members of groups and the community in which they live and work? I know that most counselors believe the answers to these questions are in the affirmative, but the hard evidence to support our intuitive claims is sparse.

We do know something about the impact that higher learning has on students. This has been spurred by a few scholars that raised essential questions about the affect college attendance had on students who sought its benefits. In 1956 Philip Jacob raised serious questions about the affect of college attendance on values when he reported that there seemed to be greater value homogeneity and consistency among college students at the end of

their four year of college than when they entered college, and many dropped out because they had not "found their experience or associations really congenial" (p. 6). He believed the changes he did find could be attributed to the selection and retention of students rather than the impact of the experience itself. Needless to say, this report created a storm of controversy and generated a number of studies of attitudes and value change among college students. By 1969, Feldman and Newcomb, in their now classic publication The Impact of College on Students, were able to identify a substantial amount of data at variance with Jacob's conclusions. Very briefly, they concluded that the impact of college was greatest for those students who were psychologically open to new experiences or were open to the influence of others (p. 304). This work has been recently updated in a monumental effort by Pascarella and Terenzini (1991). Pascarella and Terenzini posed three primary questions they sought to answer from their synthesis of the literature: (a) Do students change in various ways during the college years? (b) To what extent are changes attributable to the college experience and not to other influences, like maturation? and (c) What characteristics and experiences tend to produce changes?

Changes that occur during the college experience seem not to be centered in a few isolated areas, but rather, the research indicates that college students change in integrated ways and that change in any one area appears to mutually reinforce a

network or pattern of changes across other areas. This seems consistent with student development theories (e.g., Chickering, 1969; Heath, 1968) and with self-organization theory (Caple, 1985, 1987a). The college student makes substantial gains in general verbal skills, general quantitative skills, specific subject matter knowledge, oral and written communication skills, critical thinking, and the ability to deal with conceptual complexity or, as Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) stated, "the individual becomes a better learner" (p. 559).

But, equally important, I believe is the changes that are shown toward openness and a tolerance for diversity, a stronger "other-person orientation," and concern for individual rights and human welfare. Another unifying change in attitude and value during college is a direction away from the instrumental or extrinsic values of education and occupation toward higher valuing of intrinsic rewards. The motivation for attending college and the changes that occur during college may be largely independent of each other (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, pp. 559-560).

Although more modest than changes in learning and cognitive development, but similar in magnitude to changes in attitude and values, student psychosocial development is apparent, particularly in the areas of identity, ego development, and self-concept. But, the psychosocial changes experienced during the college years extend beyond the inner world of the self to

include relational development in students' lives, the manner in which they engage and respond to other people, and to other aspects of their external world. As students become better learners, they also appear to become increasingly independent of parents (but not necessarily peers), increase their sense of control over their world and what happens to them, and become somewhat more mature in their interpersonal relations, both in general and in intimate relations with the same or opposite sex (Pascarella & Terenzini, p. 562).

In total, the evidence from all three syntheses suggests that a reasonably consistent set of cognitive, attitudinal, value, and psychosocial changes have occurred among college students over the last four or five decades. Although insufficient empirical evidence exists to indicate that changes in one area cause changes in other areas, Pascarella and Terenzini found it reasonable to conclude from the evidence they reviewed that the changes coincident with college attendance involve the whole person and proceed in a largely integrated manner.

As has long been known, focusing on average group differences may mask individual differences. Some individuals may change substantially whereas others may change very little. Furthermore, emphasized throughout the literature is the awareness that freshman-to-senior change during college does not necessarily reflect the impact of college. Changes that take

place during the college experience are produced by multiple influences, some internal (and perhaps ontogenetic) and others external to the individual (Pascarella & Terenzini, p. 566).

The importance of engineering educational programs to be more responsive to individual student differences is regularly emphasized, but the evidence available indicates that this really occurs on only a few college campuses. Although research efforts so far have not produced much knowledge about how to achieve this goal, there is evidence that all students do not respond in the same way to institutional structures. Although the nature of a specific academic department or discipline may have little impact on noncognitive development, there is increasing evidence that the organizational and interpersonal climate of the department may have significant impact. Personal and educational changes are observable in departments where faculty and students share common attitudes and values; where interpersonal changes between faculty and students are frequent, friendly, and not rigidly hierarchial; and where there is a department esprit de corps (Pascarella & Terenzini, p. 652). The logical conclusion is that efforts to develop departmental and institutional environments will influence educational outcomes.

A recent typological model described by Astin (1993) and derived from extensive data, proposes that certain types of students interact well with academic environments to help produce a positive environment or educational climate, whereas other

types do not. There is little reason to believe that counseling can do much to change one type to another or significantly modify these personal types, but counseling may help individuals realize the more positive aspects of their personal type that relate to academic environments while controlling some of their more negative characteristics that block positive achievement.

In much the same manner, the evidence still supports the residential campus experience with achieving higher levels of integration in the academic and social system of an institution. But, the effects of programmatic, structural, and organizational characteristics of residence halls appear to be indirect, exerting influence only indirectly through interpersonal relationships and experiences. This should lead a person to consider whether or not the particular nature of residence hall programming may be less important than the fact that students are helped to become involved more fully with one another and the educational structure of the institution. The most important ingredients of educationally effective student residence units may be the characteristics, interests, values, attitudes, and orientations of the students who live there. There is some reason to believe, too, that students may pursue involvement and interaction on their own initiative at least as well as they do under the direction of professional staff (e.g., see Schuh & Kuh, 1984). This is parallel to the experience in counseling centers that students who seek out counseling for themselves profit

considerably more than those who are directed in some manner to obtain counseling.

Feldman and Newcomb (1965, pp. 82-83) documented that freshmen in the 1950s and 1960s arrived on campus generally eager, enthusiastic, and serious about their future college experience. They held high personal expectations, and they expected and wanted the academic and intellectual area to play an important part in their life at college. Longitudinal studies documented, however, the percentage decrease of students emphasizing academic and intellectual satisfactions, whereas the percentage who felt their greatest satisfaction came from other sources increased (e.g., interpersonal and personal growth experiences in particular).

Stern (1962) analyzed the evidence available then and concluded that college impact was strongly affected by the interaction of a particular student's personality needs and the environmental press of the institution. The evidence compiled a little later by Feldman and Newcomb (1969) suggested that the more incongruent students are with their environment the more likely it is they will withdraw from that college or from higher education in general. They continued by saying that probably the amount and nature of impact is dependent upon the particular combination of continuities and discontinuities, congruences and incongruences and that, perhaps, the ideal relationship between student and college should be a continuing series of not-too-

threatening discontinuities. Too much discontinuity may create resistance and too little may produce insufficient challenge. This conclusion seems influenced by the old psychological principle that if provided with a new idea, not too far outside the person's psychological continuum, the individual is more likely to reach out and incorporate it into their perceptual framework, thereby causing a reordering of the continuum in a seemingly unpredictable pattern. But, if the new idea is too far outside the person's psychological continuum they generally reject it, and the psychological continuum contracts and becomes more rigid.

Pascarella and Terenzini (1991, p. 648) detected from their review of the literature on college attendance two persistent themes. The first is the central role of other people in a student's life, whether they are faculty or other students, and the character of the learning environment they create and the nature and strength of the stimulation their interactions provide for learning and change of all kinds. The second theme is the potency of the student's effort and involvement in the academic and nonacademic systems of the institution they attend. The greater the effort and personal investment a student makes, the greater the likelihood of educational and personal returns on the investment across a range of outcomes to the college experience.

They indicated that the research is clear about the important influences faculty members have on student change in

nearly all areas studied. With this knowledge, it seems very important that faculty accept responsibility for student learning and their need to be involved in student lives. Although not much is found in the literature to indicate the specific impact of counseling on the outcomes of the college experience for students, there is every reason to believe that the potential, at least, is considerable.

The continued observation of college counseling center directors is that students bring more difficult and serious personal problems with them to the campus and the college counseling center than ever before (Gallagher, 1991; Stone & Archer, 1990). This, perhaps, should not be surprising. As the social system within which they exist and grow-up becomes more complex, unstable, and susceptible to change, the frequency and difficulty of choice that people must make in their lives will also increase (see Caple, 1987a, 1987b). The real world is always changing. Some of these changes are predictable and some of them are not. Choosing is difficult work and produces stress. Managing one's life in this reality is difficult, and almost everyone at some time needs help and support to do so.

The counselor's role is to help clients achieve a reasonable acceptance of their "self" and a workable relationship with reality. To do so, I believe, the counselor must grasp the dimensions of reality as well or better than anyone else. The reality of the college counselor's world, no less than faculty,

is the need to visibly show support of the mission of the institution in which they work. In the present state of the art and science of counseling, this is not easy to do. It is why counseling centers too often emphasize numbers and new programs. The greater need, I believe, is to demonstrate in concrete ways the impact counseling has on students learning to manage reality and function successfully within the mission of their particular institution. In a world in which the competition for limited resources is keen, clarity about what counseling can do and evidence to support its affect on the learning environment and its impact on student outcomes is essential. For example, counselors need to learn more about how the cognitive and noncognitive processes are affected by counseling to influence students toward more autonomous learning behaviors.

College counselors must become more active, I believe, in reaching beyond the walls of counseling centers and working with institutional environments. The evidence seems clearly to indicate that the strongest impact is achieved as a result of the kind of experience the environment creates. Counselors need to influence the environment of their centers both externally and internally. For example, there is evidence that effective academic support programs require proactive interventions because reactive "drop-in" programs are generally not used well by at-risk students. At-risk students have difficulty (a) recognizing that a problem exists, (b) asking for help, and (c) asking for

available help in time (see Levin & Levin, 1991). Further, successful academic retention programs rely upon small group rather than one-to-one tutorials. Researchers believe that group identification generates peer support and reduces the likelihood of tutor (or counselor?) dependency and heterogeneous groups appear to improve self-esteem.

The future education of counselors concerns me, too. In an era of specialization and licensure or certification that may justifiably extend the education process, there is also the danger that it is becoming too narrow. To fulfill their role successfully, counselors, I believe, must be among the most fully and broadly educated people in the world. To bridge generations, to move effectively among the different colors, shapes, and sounds of culture; to touch the human spirit with its unlimited capacity to experience; to know as much of the world in human terms as possible can only be enhanced by a journey into the arts, humanities, literature, science, history, and philosophy developed by humans through the ages. Without this breadth and depth of knowing, the human capacity to appreciate the diversity of the world is handicapped, and the ability to respond to change is restricted. Specialization is necessary and without the tools it provides counseling will undoubtedly remain more art than science. But, specialization without context will produce a dull sword indeed.

Change is created by the choices people make, and change is maintained by the autonomy to respond that people develop. Counselors must remember this applies equally to themselves as it does to their clients. Success will depend not upon the ability to predict change but upon the ability to respond to and manage change. This is at the heart of the college counselor's work.

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